

WINE

Sips with notes of fog, wind

Petaluma Gap appears on labels but may take a while to catch on

By **SHERYL JEAN**
Special Contributor

Do wind and fog have flavor? That's debatable, but you can taste their influence on wine from one of the nation's newest grape-growing areas — the Petaluma Gap — in northern California.

This new American Viticultural Area is known for chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah grapes, which like the longer growing season and cool weather brought by the area's defining wind and fog.

People may recognize some of the Petaluma Gap wineries, such as Keller Estate Winery and Kosta Browne Winery. In addition, many other well-known brands, such as Cline Cellars and Kendall-Jackson Winery, make wine from grapes grown in the Petaluma Gap.

Consumers started seeing "Petaluma Gap" on wine labels at stores in February or March. And travelers to California can add wineries in the Petaluma Gap, which is about 30 miles north of San Francisco, to their wine-tasting itinerary.

"Consumers will enjoy a high degree of confidence in know-

ing what to expect in terms of wine character and quality when they see the Petaluma Gap AVA on a label," said John Calmeyer, director of sales and marketing for McEvoy Ranch in Marin County. The small winery and its vineyards lie within the Petaluma Gap.

Although the designation is new, grapes have grown in the Petaluma Gap for about 150 years. In February 2015, a group of growers and winemakers petitioned the federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau to establish the AVA. It became the nation's 240th appellation in December 2017.

It's really a sub-appellation because it lies within two larger existing grape-growing areas — Sonoma Coast and North Coast. The Petaluma Gap Winegrowers Alliance, however, showed through maps, weather data, soil samples and other documentation that the area has a distinct climate and other characteristics.

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The Petaluma Gap stretches diagonally from the Pacific Ocean through the city of Petaluma east to San Pablo Bay, but only 4,000 of its 202,476 acres are planted with vineyards. Most of the land lies within Sonoma County, but some of it is in Marin County.

Cool marine air blows through a coastal mountain opening in a rare west-to-east funnel. A typical day in the Petaluma Gap starts with cool fog, followed by early afternoon warmth, then later afternoon winds and evening fog.

The alliance worked with the University of California, Davis to document what happens to grapes in the Petaluma Gap's climate, said Rickey Trombetta, president of the alliance during the process and co-owner of Trombetta Family Wines in Forestville, Calif. Grapes become smaller with

thicker skin and contain more tannins that balance the sugar to produce a concentrated flavor, she said.

An AVA contains distinctive characteristics and geographic boundaries based on federal regulations. It means vintners can better describe where their fruit grows, and consumers can better identify distinguishing features of the area.

There's no question an AVA "adds cachet," said Justin Seidenfeld, current president of the alliance and director of winemaking at Rodney Strong Vineyards in Healdsburg, Calif. The large winery has benefited from putting AVAs, such as Alexander Valley and Chalk Hill, on labels, and plans to release its first Petaluma Gap label on its 2017 Blue Wing Vineyard chardonnay and pinot noir to wine club members this year, he said.

Anyone using grapes grown within the Petaluma Gap can use that designation if at least 85 percent of the wine is made from those grapes. That includes about 80 growers and 20 wineries in the AVA, plus more than 50 wineries that buy Petaluma Gap grapes to make wine.

Harvest, aging and bottling times can affect labeling. For red wine, more than two years can pass between grape picking and bottling. White wines typically take less time. Small producers and those with wine clubs are often able to act quicker.

This past spring, wine club members and visitors to DeLoach Vineyards in Santa Rosa, Calif., were among the first consumers to see a Petaluma Gap label — on a bottle of riesling formerly labeled Marin County, said Brian Maloney, director of winemaking. DeLoach makes five wines from purchased Petaluma Gap grapes, he said.

DeLoach, however, has no immediate plans to add Petaluma Gap to wine sold in stores, Maloney added.

"Some wineries have been using Petaluma Gap grapes for years and have a large following for wines labeled Sonoma Coast, so they must tread lightly in changing labels," Se-



idenfeld explained. “There’s a lot we need to teach people.”

The alliance, for example, hosted a lunch featuring nine Petaluma Gap wines at the Texas Sommeliers Conference in August in Las Colinas.

“As people learn about the Gap, more wineries will be comfortable taking an older bottle and changing the designation,” Seidenfeld said.



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Rodney Strong Vineyards

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